



Historic Kansas Armories

Ask any Kansan how the local armory is used and you'll get answers as varied as the buildings themselves. Although most recognize that National Guard armories are intended primarily as training and storage facilities for local Guard units, the general population also sees the nearby armory as a gymnasium and gathering place for dances, meetings, family reunions, and community events. Designed to be purely functional, these buildings also act as landmarks and hubs for their cities, supporting a variety of uses by the military and civilian population.

Many of Kansas' historic armories have been drastically altered or replaced by modern facilities, but three of the earliest armories have been identified as eligible for nomination to the National Register. These armories in Hiawatha, Kingman, and St. Marys are all more than 50 years old, have maintained their integrity, and are historically and architecturally significant.

The Kansas National Guard has its roots in the volunteer units that assisted the Union army during the Civil War, the regiments formed to counter Indian threats to settlers and early militia units. It wasn't until 1903 that a formal National Guard was created to serve as the reserve

component of the U.S. Army, placing state units under the supervision of federal authorities and establishing standards of training. The need for training facilities led to the creation in many Kansas communities of regularly-used armories for drilling and equipment storage. Although most of these were located in rented or borrowed facilities, they were the forerunners of the modern-day Kansas National Guard armories.

Kansas Guardsmen served during the Mexican Border Crisis of 1916 and then fought in France during World War I. During the Depression, hard times in Kansas meant more community support and full unit strength for local companies. Besides providing local paychecks, the Guard's organization helped stem the rash of bank robberies throughout the state since, at the time, the Guard often had manpower and equipment superior to county law enforcement agencies.

A general strengthening of the U.S. military began in the 1930s, with the military infrastructure benefitting from federally funded programs such as the Works Progress Administration. Franklin Roosevelt's WPA work projects impacted hundreds of communities with the construction of bridges, schools, stadiums,

museums, and National Guard armories. Thus, a wave of new armory construction began in the mid-1930s, impacting not only Kansas, but also the entire country.

Kingman

While all three armories were of the same era, the Kingman armory was not built with WPA funds. The Kingman armory was built in 1937 with only municipal funds. The obvious need for a new armory became clear in early 1937 when Kingman's Company L of the 137th Infantry Regiment was given orders by the government to vacate the building rented for armory use. *The Kingman Journal* accurately summarized the dilemma:

The present quarters in the Fowler building on Ave. A west has been severely criticized by the higher military authorities as lacking in many of the requirements that a first class military unit should have. Moreover, the owner of the building is not satisfied with the amount of the rent he is receiving and has signified his willingness to grant a long time lease only on condition that the rental be materially increased. This, the government



(Top) The Assembly Hall of the Kingman Armory is shown here, looking to the west. (Bottom) The east facade of the Kingman Armory, which was built in 1937 with local funds.

has positively refused to do, asserting that the present rental is all that can be paid for quarters of this sort. Hence, it appears that sooner or later, Kingman must provide better, and if possible, permanent quarters, or run the risk of having this company transferred to some other town.

A solution had to be found. An idea was proposed that a memorial armory building could be used to house National Guard activities and community events. The city was anxious to retain the local unit, and the idea of a building to house county fairs, dances, and events was quite appealing. Company L successfully campaigned for the bond vote that would bring the funds for armory construction.

After the bond proposition passed, construction rapidly progressed and the cornerstone was laid on Armistice Day, November 11, 1937. Kingman stores

were closed for the occasion and schools dismissed students at noon. The day culminated with a parade from the high school to the armory, a concert by the high school band, benedictions, speeches, and a flag raising.

Kingman was justifiably proud of its status as the first municipality in Kansas to build its own armory. Upon inspecting the building in April of 1938, regimental commander Col. Charles Browne stated, "For fifteen years I visited this company; it had the poorest accommodations of any company in the state. Now it has this fine building and it has the distinction of being the only company in the state to have an armory built by the city in which it is located."

Hiawatha

The Hiawatha National Guard armory received enthusiastic backing from its inception. The very large structure, begun in 1938 and built with WPA

The National Guard of Kansas contracted with the Kansas State Historical Society (KSHS) in 1996 for a cultural resources survey of the Kansas Army National Guard (KSARNG) installation consisting of various properties owned, operated, or used by KSARNG. The primary purpose of the study was to survey, identify, and record all significant cultural resources owned, used, or impacted by KSARNG. The study was intended to fulfill the Guard's obligations as required under the National Historic Preservation Act, as well as other laws.

As a result of the contract, KSHS staff surveyed and inventoried all 70 KSARNG sites and evaluated each for historical significance. A final report entitled "Kansas Army National Guard Cultural Resources Survey" was submitted by KSHS staff member Randall M. Thies last year. The survey identified 58 armories, with only three built before World War II; these three armories in Hiawatha, Kingman, and St. Marys were determined eligible for nomination to the National Register.

A collection of Cold War armories constructed under the leadership of Adjutant General Joe Nickell between 1951 and 1972 were also deemed significant and will soon be old enough for Register consideration. A future article in Kansas Preservation will address the post-1951 "Nickell's armories."

This article is based on the Multiple Property Documentation form entitled "National Guard Armories of Kansas," written by Susan Jezak Ford. This document paves the way for the state and local communities to recognize, protect, and preserve the National Guard armories of Kansas.

assistance, was planned to serve as a community center and as headquarters for a National Guard unit and Naval Reserve unit. The design was quite modern in appearance and the building would be large enough to house basketball games, large meetings, dances, and the town's agricultural fairs.

Even before the building was officially approved in Washington or construction begun, it was dedicated by the town's raucous German band, who assembled in the early hours one Tuesday in June 1938. *The Hiawatha Daily World* dutifully reported:

"The idea," Bandmaster Beans explained to a reporter who dumbfounded *The World* office clock by showing up before 6 a.m., "is that we decided to dedicate the armory before anyone else got a chance. We have placed an official sign there, saying the place has been dedicated. No matter what may be done from now on about the armory, she's certainly dedicated!"

The building project employed a crew of 50 men as work continued through 1940. The early completion of the building's shell allowed work to progress through the winter despite poor weather. Local excitement grew as the armory neared completion. The Hiawatha Fall Festival—a combination of agricultural and horticultural displays—was held in the unfinished building in August 1940.

One of the armory's most detailed final touches was the laying of the drill floor. Installed in September 1940, the floor was remarkable in its modernity. Interlocking hardwood planks were laid over poured concrete, using no nails. The floor, measuring 89 feet by 98 feet, was as large as that of a typical college gymnasium's, an impressive size for the increasingly popular sport of high school basketball.

When completed in September 1940, the monolithic concrete building would include the drill floor, several garages, two supply rooms, a band practice hall, a band storage room, a naval reserve room, three dining rooms, a kitchen, basement and several offices. The final cost of the enormous building was \$123,000 with the WPA paying \$76,000 of the outlay. Upon completion, ownership was transferred to the National Guard, with the agreement that the building would be maintained by the Guard but frequently rented by the community.

St. Marys

Construction of the St. Marys armory was mired in the shortages of supplies and manpower that plagued the home front during World War II. Ground was



(Top) The 1938 Hiawatha Armory was built with WPA assistance. The view is of the east front.

(Right) View of the west and south facades of the Hiawatha Armory.



broken for the armory in late April 1941 just south of US Highway 24, which still serves as the town's main street. Men were immediately employed to begin digging the foundation and to search for suitable stone at the Strosnider Quarry seventeen miles north of St. Marys.

The estimated cost of construction was set at \$55,000, with the bulk of funds coming from the WPA. Within two months of breaking ground it was evident that costs would rise, requiring city fathers to ask for (and receive) additional funds from the WPA. As construction commenced, 65 men were employed on the project during the first summer. The payroll fell to 35 men during the winter of 1942 when duties were restricted to the cutting and laying of stone.

World War II began to take its toll on the St. Marys armory project in the spring of 1942. The *St. Marys Star* reported, "The ever increasing demands of war pinched the construction prospects at the Armory last week when Uncle Sam bore down even heavier on the country's supply of building material." The missing pieces were plumbing fixtures, supplies suddenly frozen by the War Production

Board. The issue was resolved when the priority rating of the armory changed to a Preference Rating at the plea of the City Manager.

By September 1942 the project passed its original completion date and further setbacks occurred. The work crew dwindled to nine men, as labor left the WPA project for better paying jobs in construction, the railroad, and similar private employment. By November, all that remained were "six or seven gray-haired men," according to the *St. Marys Star*. Work gradually continued as windows were installed and rock coping was added to the walls. When a December 4 presidential directive ordered the complete liquidation of the WPA, the status of the near-completed armory was unclear; however, enough of the armory was finished by April 1, 1943 to house a war bond dance.

The armory was finally dedicated on May 8, 1943. The dedication was a day-long affair, filled with speeches, band performances, demonstrations of war conditions, and jeep rides, followed by a dance. The final cost of providing a home for a unit that was away at war was

\$85,000, but the Drill Hall was proclaimed unanimously as “the most beautiful ball room in half a dozen counties.”

PWA Moderne

The design of the Hiawatha, Kingman, and St. Marys armories followed national trends of the late 1930s and early 1940s including the development of clean lines, simple forms, and geometric styles. The three armories were all designed in variations of the PWA Moderne style, an architectural subcategory frequently used on public buildings between 1933 and 1944. PWA Moderne combines the vertical geometry of Art Deco, the horizontal streamlining of Moderne, and the traditionalism of the Beaux Arts.

The floor plans of these three buildings are typical of armories of this era, with an office/classroom area placed adjacent to a large drill floor. The three armories all contain reserved ornament, prominent horizontal features, and noticeable vertical punctuation. Materials used are a combination of the traditional and the modern. The Kingman and St. Marys armories are clad in conventional materials—brick and stone, respectively—and the Hiawatha armory is constructed of poured concrete. All three armories make use of modern materials that include glass block, metal molding, or ornamental concrete. The three buildings are in very good condition and will continue to serve as local landmarks while accommodating the needs of their communities into the future.



(Top) The St. Marys Armory was built in 1941-1943 with WPA assistance. Shown above is the west facade of the building.



(Right) Shown here is the Assembly Hall of the St. Marys Armory, looking to the south.

(Below) View of the south facade of the St. Marys Armory.



Heritage Trust Fund Grants Awarded

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Mill in Lindsborg will be used for window repair as well. The project also will include repointing of the masonry around the sills and stone wainscot.

An award of \$32,918 will be used to repair the detached cellar at the Gilmore/Kent Farm located near Highland. The work will include excavation around the cellar, stone repointing and relaying, and installation of a waterproof membrane and foundation drain system.

The foundation of McCormick School in Wichita will be repaired with a grant in the amount of \$86,400. This project will include removal of concrete from around the foundation, installation of a drainage system, repointing of foundation joints, and the addition of a graded slope for drainage.

The \$88,000 awarded for the preservation of the Phillip Hardware Store in Hays will be used for masonry cleaning and repointing, window repair, application of a roof coating, and sidewalk replacement.



The Phillip Hardware Store, one of the oldest buildings remaining in Hays, will have an \$88,000 grant for masonry work, window repair, and roof replacement.

The annual application deadline for the Heritage Trust Fund is March 1. For more information contact the Kansas Historic Preservation Office, 6425 SW Sixth Avenue, Topeka, Kansas 66615 or call (785) 272-8681 Ext. 216.